

# A learning process under pressure



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## Preface

“Collectively drawing up the plans for the investments in the quality of education was a treat,” or so the researchers were told repeatedly during the interviews that were conducted in the purview of this study. This is perhaps the main yield of the process relating to the development of the Quality Agreements at the universities. In concert, students, teachers, university authorities, support staff, and supervisors have formulated the plans for investing additional funds in educational quality. In addition to garnering widely supported input for the plans, this has also boosted the community spirit within the institutions; the participation councils have been given impetus; and the role of the Supervisory Board has been expanded, as is stated in Chapter 6. A report on the substantive yield of the Quality Agreements will be published concurrently with this study. This national picture shows that the universities are investing in all six themes listed in the sector agreements. The themes selected most frequently are educational facilities, student counselling, and staff quality. The national picture confirms, as does this report, that the plans have been developed in close consultation with the participation councils, but also with the universities’ broader rank and file.

If it was such a treat, then why commission a study into the development process of the Quality Agreements? It was not only fun and games. The process was new to all those involved, whilst concurrently being under pressure. Initial assessments resulted in more negative reports than we had expected. As we would with unexpected exam results, we wanted to gain a better understanding of what has happened and what we can learn from that. This ties in with the development-oriented quality culture pursued by NVAO. Hence, we requested the independent research agencies AEF and ResearchNed to conduct a thorough study of the process, from the initial arrangements set down in the sector agreements up to and including the first round of assessments. This will give us more insight into the unexpected outcomes of the process and enable us to collectively learn how we can improve or modify our courses of action in the future.

With their study, AEF and ResearchNed have produced a recognisable and insightful reconstruction of the process, along with distinct recommendations for the next stage (see Chapter 5), revolving around sufficient time; coordination and (internal and external) knowledge sharing; proper communication; and expectation management. These recommendations may not come as a great surprise, but it would be good to take them into account on the road to the next stages of the Quality Agreements and other sector-wide tracks.

This study has focused on the development process of the Quality Agreements up to and including the first round of plan assessments. However, the first phase also comprised the option of re-assessment and re-submission of plans, before the Minister would take a final decision on the allocation of study advance resources. By now, many of the universities that initially received a negative recommendation have re-submitted their plans. So far, all the panel reports that we have received regarding these plans are positive, without a single exception.

“The proof of the pudding is in the eating”, as the saying goes. This also applies here. In the interviews being conducted with the universities, they inform us that they are working hard on the realisation of the plans, even in these times of Covid-19. Eventually, by 2024, we will review the efforts that have been expended and how they affect the quality of the education provided by universities of applied sciences and research universities. In the process leading up to the final date of the Quality Agreements, this report provides useful and early feedback for the university

administrators as well as for NVAO and for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. NVAO is confident that these plans for the investment of study advance resources will further enhance the quality of higher education.

Finally, I would like to thank all the interviewees for their willingness to speak to the researchers and to share their experience. This affords us as NVAO, along with our stakeholders, the opportunity for further development and learning!

Anneke Luijten-Lub

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Occasion

### **Study advance resources to be invested in Quality Agreements**

In 2015, the loan system was introduced for all students enrolled in higher education. At that time, it was agreed that the decommitted funds (i.e., the study advance resources) would be invested in the improvement of the quality of higher education. In April 2018, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science concluded an agreement to this end with the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH), the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), the National Union of Students (LSVb), and the Dutch National Students Association (ISO). The essence of the agreements was that publicly funded universities were to draw up a quality plan for their education. Upon approval of such a plan, they would receive a proportional share of the study advance resources.

### **NVAO to assess the quality plans of the institutions**

The Minister of Education, Culture and Science has commissioned NVAO to assess the quality plans of the institutions: the ex-ante assessment. In the subsequent stages of the process, NVAO will also assess the progress of the plans and evaluate their realisation. The ex-ante assessments were conducted between October 2018 and January 2020.

### **Number of institutions receiving a negative report exceeding the expectations**

NVAO had expected only a few universities to fail the ex-ante assessment. This turned out not to be the case. By now, NVAO has assessed all the quality plans, and the first round has resulted in a negative conclusion for 18 out of the 54 institutions. This is not yet final. The plans rated as unsatisfactory will be given another go; the re-assessments have not been taken into consideration in this process evaluation, as most of them were still pending at the time of the study. The question remains as to why the initial assessments of the plans have resulted in so many negative scores. The unexpected number of rejected plans is relevant considering the importance – for all the students at all the universities – of the available resources being spent on the improvement of educational quality.

## 1.2 Research question

The study was intended to examine which aspects of the process have contributed to the unexpected negative scores. The outcomes of the study should help to fine-tune future similar assessments and provide insight into the controllable and unintended effects of the process structure.

### **The study has focused on the following key question:**

Which aspects of the process – the development of the Quality Agreements, the development of the protocol, communication on the approach, clarity of the protocol, and the eventual implementation – have contributed to the unexpectedly high number of negative ex-ante assessments?

## 1.3 Our approach

### We have reconstructed the process based on documents and data

In order to find out which aspects of the process contributed to the negative ex-ante assessments, we first needed to gain a clear picture of the actual process – from the first mention of the Quality Agreements up to the present. To this end, we have examined, inter alia, relevant Parliamentary memoranda; the sector agreements of the universities; the protocol for the assessment of Quality Agreements; the plans submitted by the universities; the panel assessments; and the NVAO recommendations. Furthermore, we have conducted a statistical analysis of the initial NVAO assessments.

### We have tested the process reconstruction among national parties and discussed their perceptions

Subsequently, we interviewed national parties involved to fine-tune the process reconstruction. We also asked them about their experience with several factors and about potential explanations for the unexpectedly large number of negative ex-ante assessments. To this end, we have spoken with staff from the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH); the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU); the National Union of Students (LSVb); the Dutch National Students Association (ISO); the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; and NVAO.

### Subsequently, we spoke with universities, panel members, and process coordinators

We subsequently conducted a case analysis at nine universities. In our selection of the institutions, we pursued sufficient diversity (i.e., universities of applied sciences versus research universities; small versus large; negative assessments versus positive assessments). At each institution, we spoke with the project leader, representative(s) of the participation council, the administrator involved, and the supervisor involved. With them, we discussed the process and the relevant points for attention. Furthermore, we interviewed six panel members and several NVAO process coordinators.

<b>Institutions covered in the case analysis</b>	
- Saxion University of Applied Sciences	- HKU University of the Arts Utrecht
- Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences	- Maastricht University
- University of Applied Sciences Leiden	- Tilburg University
- HAN University of Applied Sciences	- Delft University of Technology
- Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences	

### The outcomes of the study are presented in this report

This report summarises the outcomes of the study.

- Chapter 2 contains a statistical analysis of the assessments.
- Chapter 3 features the process reconstruction of the build-up to the Quality Agreements protocol.
- Chapter 4 outlines the process reconstruction following the introduction of the Quality Agreements protocol.
- Chapter 5 contains the conclusions and our recommendations.

## 2 Analysis of the panel reports

What do the panel reports say? This is outlined in this chapter. We have considered the number of positive and negative panel reports, their distribution over the year, and potential underlying explanations for the negative reports.

### 2.1 The figures

**18 out of the 54 institutions received a negative panel report, most of which involved universities of applied sciences**

The first round of assessments took place from October 2018 up to and including January 2020. The quality plans of 54 institutions were assessed: 36 universities of applied sciences and 18 research universities. In 36 cases, the panel report was positive; in 18 cases, the report was negative. The table below shows the distribution between the universities of applied sciences and the research universities. Of note is the fact that the percentage of negative panel reports concerning research universities is comparatively lower than the percentage of reports relating to universities of applied sciences.

Figure 1. Overview of number of positive and negative panel reports

Number of institutions			
	Total number of panel reports	Positive panel report	Negative panel report
	Universities of applied sciences	Research universities	

**Combining the Quality Agreements with an institutional audit: no apparent impact**

Institutions that had applied for or intended to apply for an institutional audit could combine the ex-ante assessment of the Quality Agreements with said institutional audit. This would minimise the administrative burden of the ex-ante assessment. Nonetheless, the assessment of the plan and the institutional audit still remained two separate elements of the process. Eventually, 19 institutions combined the ex-ante assessment of the Quality Agreements with their institutional audit. In these cases, the panel visits were coordinated. Another 7 institutions participated in the institutional audit process but received separate panel visits, for example, because the institutional audit had already been completed.

The figure below reflects the number of positive and negative panel reports, distinguishing between universities not undergoing an institutional audit, universities undergoing a separate institutional audit, and universities combining the institutional audit with the Quality Agreements. The figure shows little difference between the reports on universities combining the institutional audit with the Quality Agreements and universities not undergoing an institutional audit. Of note is the comparatively high number of positive reports regarding universities with separate Quality Agreement and institutional audit processes.

Figure 2. Distribution of positive and negative panel reports, distinguished by institutional audit

No institutional audit		
Institutional audit combined with Quality Agreements		
Institutional audit separate from Quality Agreements		
Positive panel report		Negative panel report

**Percentage of positive/negative reports varying over time**

In order to find out whether the panel reports drawn up at the start of the process differ from those drawn up towards the end, we have set the dates of the site visits alongside the panel assessments. Figure 3 shows the percentage of positive/negative panel reports in a particular quarter. Most of the panel reports were published in Q2 2019 and Q4 2019. However, these two quarters present a different picture: in Q2 2019, approximately half of the panel reports were positive, whereas in Q4 2019 nearly all the panel reports were positive.

Figure 3. Distribution of positive and negative panel reports over time

2018 – Q4		
2019 – Q1		
2019 – Q2		
2019 – Q3		
2019 – Q4		
2020 – Q1		
Positive panel report		Negative panel report

**Not all of the panel reports adopted by NVAO and the Minister of Education, Culture and Science**

The reports drawn up by the panels were reviewed by the Executive Board of NVAO. After examining the consistency and transparency of a report, the Executive Board forwarded a recommendation to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. Subsequently, the Minister took a positive or negative decision. In three cases, the Executive Board of NVAO did not adopt the positive panel report on an institution and submitted a negative recommendation to the Minister. With respect to one of these three institutions, the Minister deviated from the recommendation of the NVAO Executive Board. This institution eventually received a positive conclusion. In yet another case – featuring a negative recommendation by both the panel and the NVAO Executive Board – the Minister took a positive decision following a negative recommendation.

**2.2 Background to the negative panel reports**

During the ex-ante assessments, the quality plans were assessed on the basis of three criteria. The quality plan needed to score a “satisfactory” on all three criteria. The criteria were<sup>1</sup>:

- Criterion 1.* The plan contributes to the improvement of educational quality in a well-reasoned manner. The institution has clearly formulated how it intends to spend the study

<sup>1</sup> Source: Protocol for the Assessment of Higher Education Quality Agreements 2019-2024

advance resources and what goals it intends to achieve with respect to the educational quality themes stated; its intentions chime with the context, history, and broader (educational) philosophy of the institution.

*Criterion 2.* The internal stakeholders have been sufficiently involved in the development of the plan and the plan commands sufficient support among internal and relevant external stakeholders.

*Criterion 3.* The intentions stated in the plan are realistic considering the proposed use of instruments and means, and considering the organisation and processes in place within the institution.

### **In all the negative panel reports, unsatisfactory score on criterion 3**

In all the cases resulting in a negative report and/or decision, the unsatisfactory score with respect to the third criterion constituted the main reason for the negative report/decision. The assessments stated that the plans submitted were insufficiently elaborated, lacking either specific policy actions and (decentralised) budgets, or covering an insufficient period of time. In such cases, for example, the ambitions were only concretised for the first year. However, some positive panel reports also comment that the ambitions could do with a more SMART formulation.

### **Criteria 1 and 2 tend to achieve a positive score, even among institutions receiving a negative final conclusion**

The other criteria (1 and 2; quality improvement and involvement of internal/external stakeholders) tended to be rated as satisfactory much more frequently. This also applies for institutions receiving a negative final conclusion. In some cases, these criteria were also rated as negative, which can subsequently affect the institutions' score on the third criterion.

### 3 Development of the Quality Agreements

In this chapter, we have reconstructed the development of the Quality Agreements (hereafter referred to as QA) from their first consideration by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science up to the preparations by universities and panels. The generation of the plans and their ex-ante assessment constitute the next chapter. The timeline below presents the relevant steps and dates up to the commencement of the ex-ante assessments.

2017			2018				2019			
Autumn of 2016	March	Summer	October	December	January	April	May	From the summer		April
Completion of Performance Agreements	Evaluation of Performance Agreements		Coalition Agreement		National Audit Office report		QA Protocol endorsed		Ex-ante assessments commence	General Order in Council enacted
		NVAO approached		First consultation with NVAO		Sector agreements for professional and academic HE, including substantiation of QA		Communication on protocol, preparation, and implementation		

#### 3.1 Reconstruction of the development

In the reconstruction, we have considered the perceptions of individuals who were interviewed in the purview of this evaluation. These perceptions do not necessarily need to correspond to actual situations or to the perceptions of others. In addition to a factual reconstruction, this chapter describes how various parties involved have experienced the development, and what expectations this has raised regarding the implementation of the QA.

#### Introduction of the loan system, Strategic Agenda, and termination of Performance Agreements constitute input

Upon the introduction of the loan system in the 2015-2016 academic year, it was agreed that the decommitted funds (the study advance resources) would be invested in the improvement of the quality of higher education. The Strategic Agenda entitled “The Value(s) of Knowledge” (July 2015) also announced that these funds would be linked to Quality Agreements. These agreements were intended to follow up the Performance Agreements experiment, which was rounded off and evaluated at the end of 2016.

#### *The evaluation of the Performance Agreements produces several points for improvement*

The evaluation of the Performance Agreements<sup>2</sup> showed, inter alia, that the open nature of the assessment framework for the Performance Agreements resulted in major differences in the degree of concreteness and in the capacity and funds released by the universities. According to many universities, the indicators received too much attention or did not chime with the institutional policy pursued. Finally, the universities would have liked more room for their own goals and indicators. In part as a result of the financial ramifications of the Performance Agreements, the universities felt that they were being “judged” and that thinking in terms of yield predominated. This evaluation constituted the input for the Quality Agreements that at that time still awaited drafting.

<sup>2</sup> Source:

[https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven\\_regering/detail?id=2017Z03888&did=2017D0801612](https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail?id=2017Z03888&did=2017D0801612)

### *Universities expect the approach regarding the Quality Agreements to differ from that pursued in regard to the Performance Agreements*

Many of the interviews referred to the Performance Agreements. In 2017/2018, the prevailing opinion in the higher education sector was that the Performance Agreements were not properly rounded off. The expectation was, therefore, that a different approach would be pursued in terms of the planning and assessments in the purview of the Quality Agreements, featuring two focal points: emphasis on the university's dialogue with its stakeholders, and greater scope for the university to draw up its own quality plan, tying in with its own context, mission, and ambitions, without strict adherence to specific indicators.

### **The Coalition Agreement conveys an impression of leeway and trust**

In the Coalition Agreement entitled "Confidence in the Future" (2017), the first outlines of the Quality Agreements were manifest. It set out that the funds freed up through the study advance scheme would be linked to institutional-level Quality Agreements. Furthermore, it stipulated several conditions:

- Institutions are free to draw up goals and indicators, in concert with their partners;
- The Quality Agreements must fit within the goals set out in the Higher Education Strategic Agenda;
- The Quality Agreements will be assessed by an independent body;
- Upon termination of the Quality Agreements, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science will verify whether the goals have been achieved. If not, the point of departure is that future funding will be cut.

### *National parties and institutions support these points of departure*

Under these conditions, the Ministry and the umbrella organisations entered into a dialogue on the potential set-up and implementation. The interviews revealed that across the board, the HE parties involved supported this line in the Coalition Agreement and were thus motivated to embark on quality plans.

### **NVAO agrees to its role in the process, subject to several conditions**

In the spring of 2017, NVAO was officially approached with a view to conducting the assessments of the Quality Agreements. At that time, several other organisations were also still in the running. By the end of 2017, NVAO received an administrative request from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to conduct the QA assessments. NVAO observed a few obstacles to the process. The tasks and working methods of NVAO must tie in with its statutory regulations and with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). With respect to the QA assessments, NVAO would be advising the Minister, whereas – in its capacity as independent administrative body – it would normally take its own decisions in assessment procedures. The transfer of the decision process entailed that the internal and external appeals process would also be transferred, which could result in complicated situations. Furthermore, NVAO carries out its regular tasks on a peer review basis, as stipulated in the ESG. This was at odds with the proposed approach of having a single panel or committee conduct the assessments (in line with the review panel). In early 2018, NVAO agreed to take on the assessment of the Quality Agreements, under two conditions:

- The assessments would be conducted on a peer review basis, by panels of variable composition;
- The assessments could be spread over an entire year (2019).

### **The National Audit Office report fosters a critical perspective on the QA**

In the meantime, the National Audit Office published a critical report, in which it stated that it was not clear to what extent HE institutions were actually realising the educational quality investments to which they had committed.<sup>3</sup> According to the interviewees concerned, the report fostered a more critical view of the extent to which HE institutions would be implementing the measures set out in the new Quality Agreements.

#### *University staff view the National Audit Office report as a turning point*

During the interviews, institutions regularly commented that (in retrospect) the National Audit Office report marked a turning point. Until that time, HE institutions expected to be allowed leeway and to gain the trust of the authorities. With the National Audit Office report, the first cracks appeared in this picture, and HE institutions started to question whether the ex-ante assessment would be stricter in nature, nonetheless. The idea that their plans must be verifiable became more manifest. Although administrators observed risks, this did not prompt an essentially different line of approach to the plans. The fact is that the publication of the National Audit Office report was followed by other signals – some of which originated from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, who at that time had just taken up office. These signals were of a “reassuring” nature and continued to tie in with the intentions set down in the Coalition Agreement, to allow institutions more leeway.

#### *NVAO and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science change their approach to the ex-ante assessments*

Following the National Audit Office report, the political attitude veered around towards regulation and auditing. The Tielen motion (see box below) illustrates the views prevailing in the House of Representatives. Within NVAO, the view emerged that a (relatively) strict first assessment of the plans would be better, in order to prevent subsequent criticism from the House of Representatives. As the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science also realised this, more emphasis was placed on a monitorable plan and transparent accountability. The Ministry deemed a first version of the protocol unsatisfactory with respect to these aspects. The evaluation has shown that many HE institutions were insufficiently aware of the changes in the views and the perspectives of NVAO and the Ministry.

#### **Tielen motion (28 June 2018) regarding the Quality Agreements (abridged)<sup>4</sup>**

The House, observing that the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is attaching financial consequences to the insufficient realisation of the Quality Agreements;

considering that it is essential, in the purview of determining whether such is the case, for the Quality Agreements set down to be quantifiable and to foster the goals set by the educational establishments themselves;

<sup>3</sup> National Audit Office, 25 January 2018, Pre-investments and participation councils in higher education

<sup>4</sup> House of Representatives, Parliamentary Year 2017/18 31 288 No. 643. 14

considering that, with respect to the pre-investments agreed upon earlier, a lack of clear and quantifiable agreements made it impossible for the National Audit Office to check whether the pre-investments committed to had been realised;

of the opinion that such a situation must be avoided in relation to the Quality Agreements;

requests the government to have NVAO check in advance whether the Quality Agreements set down at the institutional level are quantifiable and whether they foster the quality goals set by the institutions and their partners, in order to enable timely adjustments.

### Quality Agreements included in the HE sector agreements

By early 2018, further consultations between the national actors (the Ministry, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, the Dutch National Students Association, and the National Union of Students) regarding the set-up of the Quality Agreements led to the memorandum entitled “Investing in Educational Quality, Quality Agreements 2019–2024”. On 9 April 2018, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science signed this document along with the four above bodies. The agreements set down in this memorandum have been incorporated into the Professional Higher Education and Academic Higher Education sector agreements.

### National parties and institutions positive regarding the sector agreements drawn up

The interviews revealed a positive stance regarding the stipulations set out in the sector agreements. They confirmed the positive expectations regarding the quality plans and the idea of some leeway to be afforded to the institutions within the plans. Those involved observed that the quality plans needed to be sound and properly coordinated within the institutions, and did not envisage any major problems in the three assessment criteria. The mind-set within the higher education sector thus remained optimistic and constructive. To quote an administrator in one of the interviews: ‘We can do this!’

### Brief summary of “Investing in Educational Quality, Quality Agreements 2019–2024”

- Every university is to draw up a *plan for the period 2019 – 2024*, specifying the educational quality improvement it intends to achieve with the study advance resources by 2024.
- The university is to focus on *one or more of the six quality themes* that tie in with its philosophy, context, and history. The themes link up with the Strategic Agenda of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and with the Joint Agenda of the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, the Dutch National Students Association, and the National Union of Students.
- The universities are to translate this into *concrete measures and policy*, in a dialogue with internal and external stakeholders.
- Intentions and goals can apply for the *entire institution* (centralised), for *specific elements* (decentralised), or for specific groups of students/staff. The decentralised participation councils are to be involved in decentralised substantiations.
- In a *multi-year budget*, the university is to provide insight into its spending of the study advance resources.

- *NVAO is to assess every plan in an independent manner* and to advise the Minister of Education, Culture and Science accordingly. An *assessment framework* will be drawn up for this purpose, based on *three criteria*:
  1. The plan contributes to the improvement of educational quality in a well-reasoned manner and chimes with the context, history, and philosophy of the institution;
  2. Internal stakeholders have been sufficiently involved in the development of the plan and the plan commands sufficient support among internal and relevant external stakeholders;
  3. The intentions stated in the plan are realistic.
- The evaluation of the realisation of the plan will not carry any *financial consequences*. Study advance resources for 2019 and 2020 will be added to the regular government funding and the institutions will be held to account regarding their spending of the funds.

### Sector agreements to be translated into protocol and Order in Council

Subsequently, the stipulations of the sector agreements were processed into an implementation protocol and an Order in Council, which constituted the legal foundation for the protocol. In January 2018, NVAO embarked on the elaboration of the protocol, which was completed by May 2018. To finalise the protocol, NVAO organised several meetings with representatives of the university associations, the student organisations, and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Unlike the meetings regarding the frameworks for the Quality Agreements – that mainly involved administrators – the protocol meetings were held at the decision-making level.

#### *Involvement of internal stakeholders discussed in great detail*

According to the interviewees, several elements of the protocol – specifically, the second assessment criterion (the involvement of internal and external stakeholders) – were discussed in detail. At that time, no-one had a clue that the substantiation of the third criterion (multi-year concrete elaboration) would present particular difficulties. The third criterion did not specifically come up in the discussions.

#### *Expectations regarding the protocol still assuming emphasis on trust*

The term of the Quality Agreements would be aligned with that of the institutional audits, viz., six years. Consequently, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science set great store by the plans of the institutions covering the entire period of time. The two university associations preferred a robust plan without the need for annual negotiations with internal stakeholders such as the participation council. At the same time, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences pressed for a period shorter than six years. Following discussions on the issue, the parties decided on a three-year period. The requirement of multi-year elaboration was incorporated in the protocol without this specification. Later on, when the plans were concretised, some institutions questioned the advisability of multi-year concrete elaboration in a dynamic environment such as education. Criterion 3 gave rise to different ideas and expectations within the HE sector. On balance, the debates on the contents of the protocol did not sound any alarms. The protocol was regarded as open to various interpretations, but the dominant expectation among the institutions remained that in actual practice, the emphasis would continue to be on internal dialogues and trust.

### *Protocol finalised on 23 May, shortly after the sector agreements were signed*

On 23 May 2018, following consultations with the university associations and the student organisations, and with approval from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Board of NVAO finalised the protocol for the assessment of the Quality Agreements 2019 – 2024. Following the endorsement of the protocol, according to those involved, no more regular consultations were held regarding the Quality Agreements. NVAO embarked on the preparation of the panels; the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science was working on the Order in Council; the university associations and the student organisations informed their members.

#### **Brief summary of the protocol**

- From an objective point of view, the three assessment criteria in the protocol *have not been specified in more detail* or elaborated further, compared to the sector agreements.
- With respect to criterion 3, the protocol stipulates that the institution must have *adequately elaborated* the plan into concrete *policy actions and processes*.
- Further down, but not explicitly under the three criteria, the protocol states that the institution must describe its intended spending (intentions) and include a *multi-year budget* in its plan that specifies how the study advance resources will be spent.
- The institution must demonstrate that it is *monitoring the progress* made and adjusting its intentions wherever necessary. The timeframe/procedure outlined in the protocol does not feature any rules or guidelines regarding practical matters in the process, such as the option for institutions to submit supplementary documentation either prior to or after the panel visit.

### *Different perspectives on the rate at which the protocol was established*

Several interviewees have stated that the protocol was established in a short period of time, viz., only weeks after the sector agreements were signed. They attributed this to the great urgency of the process: as the current generation of students was experiencing the consequences of the loan system, the aim was to have them reap the benefits of the quality plans as soon as possible.

In actual practice, NVAO had already commenced the preparations for a protocol even before the sector agreements were signed. According to NVAO, the goal was to have the protocol ready when the sector agreements were signed. This attempt failed, which means that the parties have actually taken more time than planned in advance for drawing up the protocol. In the view of NVAO, in any case, the consultations on the protocol – at both the decision-making and administrative levels – were thorough and went into great detail. In retrospect, those involved feel that the protocol was established too much in a “bubble” of national (umbrella) organisations and too little in interaction with operational managers who would have to draw up a plan on the basis of the protocol.

### *Order in Council enacted too late to play any significant role in the process*

The Ministry elaborated the required Order in Council, which was ultimately only enacted in April 2019. At that time, the first plans had already been assessed. In fact, the Order in Council was published too late to play any significant role in the process. Consequently, hardly any interviewees refer to the Order in Council. Of note is, however, that the text seems more in accordance with the original expectations of the institutions than the relatively strict interpretation ultimately given to the

protocol. As the various public documents differ considerably as to the formulation of key concepts (such as the concrete actions/policies into which intentions must be translated), the next paragraph contains a brief comparison.

### **Brief summary of the Order in Council regarding the Quality Agreements**

- An institution must describe its intentions with respect to each of the quality themes and the expected progress in the realisation of these intentions as of 31 December 2021.
- In the Order in Council, intentions are specified as intended *concrete measures or concrete policy*. In the Explanatory Memorandum, this is illustrated as, e.g., the “active recruitment and appointment of a certain number of student psychologists”.
- The Explanatory Memorandum to the Order in Council identifies *leeway for the institutions, confidence in the institutions, and a horizontal dialogue* as key points of departure.
- The assessment reviews whether the plans have been adequately translated into *concrete and quantifiable policy actions and processes*.
- The assessment reviews whether the *internal and external stakeholders regard the intentions as realistic and feasible*, considering the financial context of the university and considering its philosophy and policy.
- The institution *can* demonstrate the viability of a plan by showing that it is *monitoring* its progress and *adjusting* its intentions if need be.
- The improvement option (“second chance”) is an *additional* instrument for *minimising the number of rejections*.
- The assessment of the progress does not consider the achievement of goals, since goals frequently *depend on other factors*. Adjustments of the plan, however, are taken into account.

### 3.2 Criteria and formulations in various documents

A comparison of key documents (Coalition Agreement, sector agreements, protocol, and Order in Council) produces a picture of differences in formulation of concepts and criteria. This need not pose a problem, but in interviews, the interpretation of the criteria concerned was referred to as a particularly difficult obstacle. Furthermore, previous formulations have supported the institutions in their expectations of being allowed scope for drawing up a plan of their own, to undergo a relatively light external assessment procedure.

#### **Documentation not entirely aligned in various respects**

A comparison of formulations shows, inter alia:

- In the sector agreement, the explanation of the elaboration by institutions refers to the multi-year budget. However, this is not explicitly embedded in the *three assessment criteria* as formulated in the protocol and in the sector agreement, although it is mentioned in the protocol, yet unrelated to the three criteria. This could lead to the interpretation that a multi-year budget is less important than the elements printed in bold type in the three criteria, such as involvement of the participation councils.
- In the sector agreement, criterion 3 is specified as the requirement that the intentions set out in the plan are realistic. The protocol stipulates, with respect to this criterion, that the

institution must *elaborate the plan adequately into concrete policy actions and processes*. The Order in Council states that an institution can demonstrate the viability of a plan by showing that it is *monitoring its progress* and adjusting its intentions if need be.

- The definitions of *intentions and concrete measures* differ from one document to the next:
  1. Sector agreement: **intentions are to be translated into concrete measures and policy**. The text does not specify whether “concrete measures and policy” are complementary variables, or whether all policies must also be translated into concrete measures.
  2. Protocol: the plan must be elaborated into **concrete policy actions and processes**. “Policy actions” seems a less strict definition than concrete measures. Furthermore, the combination with “policy processes” creates room for the interpretation that policy actions need not always be specified and that a specification of (usually less concrete) policy processes will suffice.
  3. Order in Council: this sets out that the institution must specify **concrete measures or concrete policy**. The use of the word “or” creates explicit room for only specifying policy rather than concrete measures.
- The Explanatory Memorandum to the Order in Council refers to the “active recruitment and appointment of a certain number of student psychologists” as an example of a concrete intention. This is more of an ambition than a distinct, thoroughly elaborated measure. The how, why, and when are missing. This example thus perhaps also suggests that a quality plan does not need to feature highly concrete or detailed intentions.

### Different wording can result in uncertainty and differences in interpretation

The selective enumeration above warrants the conclusion that the various documents could have fed uncertainties and multiple interpretations of the exact requirements to be met by the quality plans and of the importance of the criteria therein. The differences in formulations suggest some sort of struggle on the policy and implementation side (the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and NVAO) regarding the exact concretisation of the ex-ante assessment. In actual practice, according to interviewees, the scope for interpretation contained in the protocol constitutes a particular point for attention.

Furthermore, the limited number of consultations between the parties involved – although the early stages have seen a great deal of conferring – since the implementation of the sector agreement does not seem to have helped to prevent noise in this respect. The next chapter will consider how the further preparations for the implementation of the Quality Agreements and the communication regarding the application of the protocol have followed up on this issue.

### 3.3 In summary: the reconstruction of the development of the QA

Several important conclusions can be derived from the above process.

- The build-up to the QA proceeded well, according to those involved. The response from the institutions was positive, especially with respect to the idea of “leeway and trust”. The interviews showed serious efforts being expended on drawing up quality plans and involving stakeholders.

- The actual establishment of the QA had to be completed under pressure of time, which is why, according to interviewees, it shows signs of hasty work. The various key documents (Coalition Agreement, sector agreements, protocol, and Order in Council) show differences in emphasis and exact concept definitions with respect to plan requirements. Interviewees are virtually unanimous in the comment that some elements of the protocol are vague and leave room for interpretation. At the time, this was deemed insufficiently important, as institutions were under the impression that in actual practice, the plans would be subjected to a – quote – “light check”.
- In the preparatory stage, the institutions took their own interpretations of the QA as their point of departure and were insufficiently aware of the change in approach by the House of Representatives, NVAO, and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.
- On the other hand, those involved in the development of the QA, including NVAO, were unaware of the possibility of vital differences in interpretation, and failed to notice that the expectations of (in any case, some of) the institutions differed from the direction in which the QA assessments were developing.
- The concrete requirements regarding a multi-year budget – with respect to which most of the plans scored an “unsatisfactory” – were not explicitly included in the three criteria in the protocol for the assessment of plans. The approach of the educational establishments varied in this respect. On the one hand, they set store by a robust, multi-year plan without the need for annual internal negotiations; on the other hand, many HE institutions are not accustomed to concrete multi-year elaborations, as the dynamic environment in which they operate dictates annual adjustment of the plans anyway. Apparently, a balance between these two perspectives – robust plans with room for annual adjustment – has not been identified or embraced by all the institutions within the framework of the Quality Agreements.
- Another reason why the institutions could hold on to their interpretation of the QA was that the signals sent out by NVAO, the Minister and the university associations were inconsistent and could actually reinforce the institutions in their interpretations of the QA.

## 4 Development and assessment of quality plans

This chapter outlines the process as from the protocol endorsement by NVAO and the start of the practical implementation stage. Here, too, the factual process has been supplemented with the experience and perceptions of interviewees. Once more, it should be noted in this respect that such perceptions do not necessarily correspond to actual situations or to the perceptions of others.

### 4.1 Panel composition and preparation

Once the protocol had been endorsed, NVAO embarked on the preparations for the actual implementation of the Quality Agreements. A key element was the composition and preparation of the various panels. It was essential for the panels to pursue the same approach, insofar as possible, in their operations and plan assessments, especially considering the so-called “rolling” nature of the process: rather than concurrently, the institutions were assessed consecutively over a prolonged period of time. NVAO fostered consistency in the assessments through (an overlap in) panel composition, through training sessions and briefings for panel members, and through calibration sessions among panel chairs for the duration of the assessments.

#### **The panels were composed of a maximum of five panel members**

Each institution was linked to a panel composed of a maximum of five members, among whom one chair and one student-member. The panels were supported by a process coordinator and a secretary provided by NVAO. The panel members were required to meet several conditions. For example, they could not have any ties with the institution concerned and they needed to be authoritative at the administrative level or in the field of educational development. Furthermore, all the panel members were required to sign a declaration of independence. Once the institution had been informed of the panel composition, it was allowed a period of two weeks to submit any substantiated objections regarding the panel.

#### *Panels were regarded as expert; some compositions raised questions*

Across the board, the institutions regarded the panels as professional and expert. Some interviewees questioned the panel composition, as some of the panel members were former Board members or supervisors of other universities. The interviewees indicated that this could hamper their objectivity: as university administrators know one another, the “goodwill factor” could play a part.

#### **All the panel members were trained in the implementation of the protocol**

Prior to the ex-ante assessments, the panel members received expertise training. The training sessions pertaining to the independent assessments (i.e., assessment of a quality plan only) took place on 4 February 2019 and 14 February 2019. Panel members who were to assess the Quality Agreements in combination with an institutional audit received a 6-week training prior to their assessment, concurrently with their institutional audit training. The training sessions explained the procedures and the manner in which questions were to be posed. According to the panel members interviewed, the first training sessions did not delve deeply into the substantive application of the protocol. Only during the subsequent training session, on 17 April – when the first assessments had already been completed – were the various criteria in the protocol and the underlying ideas discussed in more detail. This can probably be attributed to the fact that initially, a detailed explanation of the criteria and their application did not seem necessary; the process itself was

paramount. When, in actual practice, panel members were found to have questions regarding the application of the criteria, they were discussed nonetheless in the sessions involving panel members and panel chairs.

#### *Some panel members doubted whether their training was adequate*

Despite the protocol training, uncertainties existed among panel members – and among process coordinators – regarding the approach and the process. According to some panel members, the training lacked clear instructions on the required strictness in the assessments. As a result, some panel members saw room for passing their own judgements and taking the context of the university into account, whereas others adopted a very strict outlook. Even within a panel, views could differ. The training session on 17 April – which focused on the protocol framework – provided more clarity in this respect.

## 4.2 Communication with the universities

Communication regarding the protocol and the implementation and assessment stages took place by various methods: via websites, meetings, and (news) letters.

#### **NVAO and national parties set up several meetings**

In 2018 (May – October), several information meetings were organised for the universities. At these – individual or collective – meetings, presentations were given by NVAO; by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; by the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences; and by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands. Administrators and quality assurance staff were invited to attend these meetings.

#### *According to interviewees, nationwide communication did not spark realistic expectations*

The key message of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in the information meetings was that the assessments were to be based on trust (and accountability). NVAO explained the process and drew an analogy with the working method and the framework of the institutional audits. In addition, the university associations held separate information meetings on the Quality Agreements. Some of the institutions indicated that in retrospect, the communication did not chime with the reality of the subsequent ex-ante assessments. The university interviewees experienced these assessments as “audits”, whereas the national information meetings did not seem to refer to an audit. Panel members and process coordinators generally confirm that the communication on the substantive application of the protocol was not univocal.

#### *The preparatory stage saw little direct contact between NVAO and the universities*

NVAO set up a web page and an email address to answer any questions from universities that had embarked on the preparations. According to NVAO, only very few institutions availed themselves of this opportunity. Several interviewees observed that some of the institutions may have ended up in a bubble of positive assumptions regarding the Quality Agreements as a result of the (national) information provided. NVAO has perhaps underestimated the efforts required to set this straight. Furthermore, process coordinators and university staff involved indicated that any contact prior to a visit predominantly focused on practical matters rather than substantive issues. On balance, considering the many retrospective uncertainties involved in the process, NVAO has received remarkably few specific questions on the approach to be pursued regarding the quality plan. The sole

explanation appears to be the lack of doubt among the universities regarding the concrete approach to the quality plan.

### **Additionally, NVAO sent several letters to the universities**

NVAO sent three letters on the protocol to the universities. Of particular importance to this evaluation is the letter that was sent in June 2019, following the varying results of the first 23 panel visits. In this letter, NVAO explicitly lists three points for attention emerging from the completed ex-ante assessments:

1. The assessment of the Quality Agreements differs from the other assessments conducted by NVAO, such as institutional audits. Consequently, the panel needs to adopt a different attitude. With respect to the Quality Agreements, the panel reviews whether the plan comprises the required elements, whereas the assessment in the context of an institutional audit is based on trust, philosophy, et cetera.
2. The plan must comprise a multi-year elaboration: for the years 2019 – 2021, in concrete terms, with an outline set-up for the years 2022 – 2024.
3. Resources that will be spent at the decentralised level must be specified in a decentralised and multi-year budget.

Many interviewees are of the opinion that the letter of June 2019 threw the first shaft of light on what exactly was expected of the universities. In this respect, they observed a stricter interpretation of the assessment criteria after the start (“rules of the game changed”), whilst additional elements were added. This was not communicated sufficiently prior to the letter.

### **Separate website for the Quality Agreements**

With assistance from the National Union of Students, the Dutch National Students Association, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, and the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, a website was created for the Quality Agreements: the national Quality Agreements desk. Since the beginning of 2020, this website has provided information on the protocol and guidelines for students and staff regarding the implementation of the protocol. The interviews did not provide clarity as to who was ultimately responsible for the website. It is clear, however, that the website arrived too late to play any meaningful part in the information provision to universities during the first round of assessments. In addition, NVAO created a page on its website to provide information on the Quality Agreements. Since May 2018, this page has featured an explanation of the protocol, answers to frequently asked questions, and relevant documents.

#### *Some participation councils would have liked an online information desk for questions*

Several university participation councils indicated that the information desk only became available at a late stage in the process and that its response was not optimal (not fast enough). Many members of the participation councils had questions regarding the generation of plans and would have appreciated a low-threshold information desk for participation councils.

## **4.3 Formulation and submission of the quality plans**

### **The universities interviewed embarked enthusiastically on their quality plans**

As stated above, many of the universities were initially expecting another type of Quality Agreement. Yet they supported and energetically embraced the concept of drawing up a quality plan in

collaboration with relevant stakeholders. Across the board, the universities interviewed set to work diligently, thoroughly, and enthusiastically on structuring an appropriate QA process.

*Not all the universities, however, were enthusiastic about drawing up a concrete multi-year plan*

To institutions expending major efforts in garnering input at the decentralised level, incorporating diverse input into a multi-year plan posed quite a challenge. Furthermore, several institutions were opposed to the idea of setting down multi-year plans at this stage, as this would preclude student participation councils from having a say in subsequent years. This prompted some of the institutions to leave the substantiation of multi-year measures in their plans fairly open and instead include pertinent process agreements. However, this did not conform to the NVAO plan requirements.

### **Universities deem themselves sufficiently equipped to draw up sound plans**

Many interviewees faced with a negative report assured us that they would have been able to submit a satisfactory plan if the requirements had been clear beforehand. This is confirmed by the fact that many rejected plans were incomplete rather than sub-standard. For example, multi-year budget components or more concrete elaborations would have rendered a plan satisfactory. For a few (predominantly smaller) universities, drawing up a quality plan constituted a fairly large burden that put the limited capacity of the organisation under great strain.

*The multi-year budgets posed quite a few challenges for the institutions*

Several interviewees indicated that the universities do not usually plan and budget in the manner as required under the Quality Agreements. Institutions were used to drawing up concrete plans for a one-year term and outline plans for the medium term. This approach can be attributed to such factors as the unpredictability of student flows and the significant dynamics and unpredictability in the rest of the institutional context. Furthermore, the Quality Agreements stipulated that any additional impetus to an overall quality agenda should be described and budgeted separately. Many universities regarded this as cumbersome and hardly useful. Another contributing factor identified in some interviews was that compared to research universities, universities of applied sciences would have less experience in setting up large multi-year (research) programmes, which would make this specific requirement more difficult for them. Other interviews, however, refuted this.

### **Institutions had a say in the scheduling of ex-ante assessments**

NVAO gave all the institutions the opportunity to indicate a preference for the date of the site visit. In October 2018, the institutions were informed of the week in which the site visit would take place. In December 2018, NVAO communicated all the dates to the institutions.

*Most institutions indicate that they had sufficient time for drawing up a plan*

The interviews showed that for most of the universities, the time factor has not played a significant part in the outcomes of the process. Although drawing up a sound quality plan was frequently described as an intensive process, a lack of time or capacity was not found to be a decisive factor in a rejection. Some interviewees reported that in retrospect, drawing up and concretising a multi-year plan would have taken a lot of (too much) time.

*Institutions that had more time could benefit from the assessments of other universities*

The time factor did play a part in other respects. As the Quality Agreements involved a “rolling process”, those submitting their plans later had the opportunity to learn from the plans submitted early. The uncertainties regarding the plan requirements were greatest at the beginning of the

process, which enabled later submitters to learn from the mistakes of others. Several institutions indicated that without the lessons learned from others, they might have received a negative report. However, this learning process was not manifest among all the later submitters: by the end of the process, some plans were nonetheless rated as unsatisfactory.

A major reason for these rejections is that the already available approved and rejected plans were interpreted differently by the universities, as this evaluation has shown. Some regarded them as a clear warning, while others considered them a confirmation (at least, not a falsification) of the initial assumptions regarding the QA. Consequently, the universities had no clear, univocal picture of the nature of the rejections and what they entailed for the generation of their own plans. This warrants the conclusion that neither the sectors themselves (the universities in a collective learning process) nor NVAO have sufficiently utilised the cases in the purview of an unequivocal interpretation by reference to examples of what exactly was expected of a quality plan.

#### *The panel members did indeed perceive pressure of time, both with the universities and with NVAO*

According to some panel members, some institutions appeared to lack time for the required elaborations, resulting in the submission of a poorly written plan. Some panel members observed that universities of applied sciences, in particular, tended to hurry through their plans and felt that the process was under great (too much) pressure of time. This also applies for NVAO, according to interviewees. The QA involved a major additional job for both staff and the Board of NVAO, whilst the capacity available was limited.

#### **In retrospect, some institutions were found to be insufficiently aware of the expectations**

As stated above, with respect to the plan requirements, in some cases the expectations of the universities differed from the manner in which the requirements were assessed under the protocol. Underlying reasons for the uncertainties in the process, identified by many interviewees, include: the urgency of the process; the scope for interpretation in the protocol; the inconsistent cues regarding the nature and the intention of the QA in national communications; and the inadequate and late communication on the exact requirements to be met by the quality plans.

#### *In some cases, however, institutions were blind to other signs*

Administrators manifestly continued to view the world from their own perspectives and occasionally may have (temporarily) been blind to other signs. This is illustrated by the fact that in this evaluation, several members of participation councils indicated that in the planning stage, they had reported or noticed that the plans of their institution had been elaborated in insufficiently concrete terms and/or covered an insufficient period or time, which would entail the risk of rejection. According to the participation councils, these reports fell on rather deaf ears.

Furthermore, several interviewees reported that the university staff involved explicitly wondered whether the quality plan under development was indeed what NVAO envisaged. In such cases, the internal answer was usually affirmative. This did not always turn out to bode well for the eventual assessment.

#### *Panel members also confirm that the requirements set for the plans were insufficiently clear*

Panel members also regarded the exact requirements to be met complied with in the plans as insufficiently clear to the institutions. In addition, several panel members feel that some institutions have underestimated the process, and – intentionally or unintentionally – have ignored the signs. In some cases, they were under the impression that administrators tended to be quite quick to assume

that the panel would operate on a basis of trust and would largely approve the plans. Furthermore, trivialising comments were heard from the House of Representatives or the Minister regarding the protocol and the requirements.

#### 4.4 Assessment of the quality plans

##### **Reception of all the relevant documents by the panels followed by a site visit**

Six weeks before the date of the site visit, the panels received the dossier, including the plan, relating to the Quality Agreements. The first site visits were conducted at Maastricht University (October 2018) and HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (December 2018). During the site visits, the panel members spoke with the participation councils; teachers and students; the university authorities; and the Supervisory Board. At the end of the day, the panel chair provided brief feedback to the institution. Subsequently, the panel drew up a report encompassing either a positive or a negative recommendation to the Board of NVAO.

##### *Interviewees would have appreciated an opportunity to submit additional information in the process*

Once the plan had been submitted, the institutions could not provide any additional information. However, according to panel members, the inadequacy of some plans was already manifest beforehand. In such cases, process coordinators and panel chairs refrained from taking pertinent action. The process coordinator only conducted a light admissibility check. Occasionally – if one of the elements had manifestly been omitted by mistake – the institution was given the opportunity to supplement the missing element prior to the visit.

##### *Remedial operations followed by a more extensive admissibility check*

At the start of the procedure to remedy the rejected plans, a more extensive admissibility check was conducted upon receipt of the dossier. In the first round, this could perhaps already have prevented several negative assessments, a visit, and frustrations, considering that some institutions were able to supply the requested additional documents within a relatively short time. However, the panels differed in their approach to this issue: some institutions were allowed to provide additional information nonetheless.

##### **Some institutions taken aback by the panel's tone during the visit**

Many interviewees observed that their image of the visit (a light check) differed from the assessment framework used by the panels. Occasionally, this resulted in surprises during the panel interviews. The institutions were not familiar with the so-called “checklist” used by the panels. The process contained noise. Expectations management by the institutions was crucial, according to interviewees, but in retrospect, turned out to be inadequate. Furthermore, some institutions harboured the perception that the panel members had already made up their minds before the visit. In the event of a negative report, the visit was then perceived as pointless.

##### *Vast differences in institutions' experiences with panel working methods*

Several interviewees expressed the feeling that institutions were assessed and treated differently from one another. This image is reinforced by the above example regarding the provision of additional information. Overall, the interviews distinctly demonstrated that the university staff involved have gained widely differing experiences with the panels. Many referred to a strong audit-like attitude on the part of the panel (strict, ticking boxes). Other respondents, on the other hand,

perceived the panel as amicable, constructive, and flexible. In the perception of some interviewees, this could result in improper differences between the panel judgements.

### **Several institutions combined the Quality Agreements with their institutional audit**

Some of the institutions requested that the Quality Agreements interviews should be combined with their institutional audit. This involved a three-day visit, the final day of which was focused on the Quality Agreements. In some cases, some time elapsed between the institutional audit and the Quality Agreements, but the visits were conducted by (largely) the same panel. Combination with the institutional audit was intended to reduce the administrative burden. Some institutions, for that matter, indicated that they did not feel that combining the procedures had eased their administrative burden, whilst a large number of institutions opted for a separate assessment rather than combination with their institutional audit.

### *Most interviewees experienced the combination of Quality Agreements and institutional audit as positive*

Most interviewees experienced the combination with their institutional audit as positive. The main reason was that the panel was already familiar with the institution due to the institutional audit. In retrospect, some interviewees deemed the combination ill-advised, because the processes involved were quite different. Many report that the panel's attitude and tone changed considerably during the last day of the visit, which took the institution by surprise. During an institutional audit, the panel acts more like a "critical friend", whereas the Quality Agreements were dominated by the feeling that judgement needed to be passed. When interviewed, several panel members stated that the image of a different attitude upon switching from institutional audit to QA tallies and is in line with the terms of reference of the panels. According to them, the training sessions provided by NVAO emphasised the difference between an institutional audit and the QA, whereby the QA assessment needed to be stricter in nature.

### **Uniformity in panel judgements fostered by proofreading and calibration sessions**

For each institution, the panel involved drew up a collective report. In some cases, this involved heavy editing if the panel members were not quite able to reach agreement. Every advisory report was proofread by two process coordinators. They checked whether the report was transparent and whether the judgement was verifiable. The proofreading was intended to ensure uniformity in the assessments. Another instrument used by NVAO to this end involved the calibration sessions with process coordinators and panel chairs to discuss any conspicuities.

### *The calibration sessions showed differences in interpretation of the protocol*

The calibration sessions revealed differences and uncertainties within and between the panels as regards how to weigh a plan. Uncertainties also existed within NVAO, e.g., with respect to the leeway to be allowed to institutions to supplement their plans. According to these interviewees, it took panels a long time to find out the exact intentions of the protocol. Some members could be considered "moderates", others "strictly orthodox".

An example involves panel discussions on whether internal stakeholders deemed the intentions feasible and realistic (criterion 3). Another point for debate was whether the panel could/had to pass its own judgement regarding the feasibility of plans, or only needed to check whether the participation council deemed them feasible. However, interviewees expressed the view that NVAO has done a great deal to provide clarity in such matters and to calibrate the panels. During the process, several consultations were held among all the panel chairs, led by the Chairman of the

Board of NVAO. These consultations addressed the experiences gained so far, dilemmas in the ex-ante assessments, the interpretation of the protocol, and points for attention in the assessment.

*Although calibration sessions were initiated too late, they were of use to the panels*

In the perception of interviewees, the calibration was conducted quite late, as a result of which the early stages of the assessments left room for interpretation and differences between and within panels. Some interviewees indicated that their panel seemed to be looking for something to go by during the assessment.

Other interviewees stated that the protocol in itself was clear, and that NVAO pointed out this line in the briefings and calibration sessions: the assessment of the QA involved a procedure stricter than an institutional audit. This called for a different perspective and attitude among the panels, which was scrupulously objective. This would also have been communicated to the institutions. Nonetheless, these interviewees also hold the perception that the protocol was not crystal clear on all counts, such as regarding the requirement of a concrete multi-year substantiation.

**The NVAO Board reviewed the panel report, the Minister took the decision**

The panel report was reviewed by the Executive Board of NVAO. Inter alia, the Board verified whether the procedural requirements had been met; whether the panel report was substantiated in a thorough, proper, and verifiable manner; and whether the judgement formation by the panels was consistent. If need be, the Board could ask the panel chair and possibly other panel members for an explanation. Subsequently, the Board submitted a recommendation to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. In some cases, the recommendation of the NVAO Board deviated from the panel judgements. Thereupon, the Minister took a positive or a negative decision. The institutions were given an opportunity to discuss a negative judgement with the Ministry. Although this was generally perceived as an open and pleasant meeting, in most cases it did not give rise to a different outcome. Upon a negative decision, the institution was allowed a period of one year to remedy the plans, whereupon another panel visit was conducted.

4.5 In summary: generation and assessment of the plans

Several important issues can be derived from the above process.

- The crux is that, according to virtually all the interviewees, the protocol was insufficiently clear and left room for interpretation, which room – upon endorsement of the protocol by NAVO – was substantiated in a stricter sense than the institutions desired and expected. The subsequent communication of this further, strict substantiation to the institutions was insufficient and too late.
- In addition, some of the panel members interviewed pointed out some deeper causes for the negative assessments: trivialisation and underestimation of the process by institutions; the possibility of less adequate planning competencies and a lack of experience in drawing up these types of plans with, in particular, the universities of applied sciences.
- In the perception of the institutions, national communication on crucial plan requirements fell short, especially in the early stages. Even targeted searches for clarity frequently failed to produce adequate answers. Of note in this respect is the fact that institutions tended to look for answers to questions and doubts themselves, rather than contact NVAO directly.

- According to those involved, the process was under great pressure (of time), which could account for uncertainties in the process; whereupon, according to interviewees, all those involved underestimated the impact that such uncertainties could have on the implementation.
- Furthermore, NVAO appears to have underestimated how firmly the image of a different, more liberal set-up of the QA had settled in the minds of the HE administrators, which contributed to the need for more robust communication and explanation of the process than was actually called for.

## 5 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter answers the key question of this process evaluation:

*Which aspects of the process – from the establishment of the Quality Agreements, establishment of the protocol, communication on the approach, clarity of the protocol, up to the eventual implementation – have contributed to the unexpectedly large number of negative ex-ante assessments?*

To put it briefly, a combination of the above aspects has resulted in a comparatively large number of plans being rated as unsatisfactory during the first round. Ergo, the blame cannot be put on a single party; moreover, that is not the purpose of this evaluation. Consequently, the paragraphs below will deal with the roles of the individual aspects and present recommendations on how such outcomes can be avoided in the future. First, we will zoom in on the backgrounds to the negative reports.

### 5.1 Impact of process aspects on number of negative reports

#### **In comparatively many plans, concretisation and multi-year coverage were rated as unsatisfactory**

Out of the 54 higher education institutions, 18 received a negative report regarding their plans. They were given one year to remedy them. It is good to nuance the number of negative judgements. Although it exceeded expectations by far, it is not a huge number in comparison with other processes, such as the Quality Agreements in the secondary vocational education sector. Of note, however, is the comparatively high number of negative reports concerning universities of applied sciences (16 out of the 36) and the comparatively low number concerning research universities (2 out of the 18). In all cases, the main reason for a negative report appears to be an “unsatisfactory” on the third criterion: “Are the intentions realistic considering the proposed use of instruments and means, and considering the organisation and processes in place within the institution?” The pertinent panel reports state that the plans submitted by the institutions were insufficiently elaborated, insufficiently concretised, or lacked a multi-year budget.

#### *Combination with institutional audit is not a factor; timing of assessment probably is*

According to the figures, combination with an institutional audit has not affected the outcome of the assessment. It is remarkable, however, that most of the negative reports were issued in the first six months of 2019; the second half of 2019 saw far fewer negative assessments. This could mean that institutions whose number was up at a later stage in the process could have learned from their predecessors. Furthermore, in June 2019, NVAO sent an explanatory letter to the institutions, which could have had a similar effect. However, many institutions indicate that it was too late to learn from the assessments of other universities, as they had already submitted their own plans by that time, or because their internal processes did not leave room for changes.

#### **Pressure on development and decision-making process compromises accuracy**

From the onset, the development process of the successor to the Performance Agreements has been under pressure from various sides, both pressure of time and political pressure. First of all, as a result of the aim to have the current generation of students – faced with the introduction of the student loan system – reap the benefits of investing the study advance resources in quality improvement. A second important factor was the evaluation of the previous Performance Agreements. Institutions felt that they were being “judged” and that thinking in terms of yield predominated in the

Performance Agreements indicators. Consequently, they hoped for more leeway and trust in the Quality Agreements.

#### *The National Audit Office report goes against the tide and asks for greater accountability*

For some eighteen months, the Ministry, the umbrella organisations, and the student organisations discussed the set-up of the Quality Agreements, including the leeway for institutions to select their own themes and the prevention of a bureaucratic process. Shortly before consensus was reached on the Quality Agreements (April 2018), the National Audit Office presented a report (January 2018) in which it requested the Ministry of Education, the House of Representatives, and the universities to expand accountability regarding educational investments and urged for better monitoring. This report constitutes a third factor in the development process, as at that time the Order in Council and the protocol still awaited formulation. In retrospect, many institutions regard this as a turning point in the process. The political pressure and pressure of time thus affect the care with which the institutions worked through the process.

#### **Different formulations can lead to differences in interpretation of the requirements**

The range of documentation regarding the Quality Agreements warrants the conclusion that different descriptions have been used for the same goals and criteria. For example, with respect to criterion 3 (realistic intentions), the protocol stipulates that the plans must be “elaborated adequately into concrete policy actions and processes”, whereas the Order in Council states that an institution can demonstrate the viability of a plan by showing that it is monitoring and, if need be, adjusting its progress. Also of note is the fact that the requirement on which many institutions foundered (multi-year coverage) is not included in criterion 3 itself but elsewhere in the protocol and the sector agreement. This is probably the reason why the parties hold different interpretations of what exactly was required in the assessment.

The development of the sector agreement mainly involved administrators, whereas NVAO discussed the elaboration of the protocol predominantly at the decision-making level. Many consultations were held within a short period of time; yet the focus was on criterion 2 (stakeholder involvement) rather than on the stumbling block, criterion 3. Once the documents were completed, the frequency of consultative meetings declined, and this issue did not immediately come up. The Order in Council, for that matter, arrived too late (April 2019) to be of value to the institutions in their preparations.

#### **Communication by national parties did not tie in with eventual reality**

Initial communication was provided by the national parties involved: the Ministry, the umbrella organisations, the student unions, and NVAO. The crux of the ministerial message was that the agreements revolved around trust and that the institutions would be given some leeway. In combination with the wording of the sector agreements, according to some institutions, this created the impression of a light check rather than a strict “audit”, as the eventual assessment was perceived. Furthermore, there was little direct communication between NVAO and the institutions regarding the substantive expectations of the plan. The institutions indicate that the national communication has misled them.

#### **The concretisation requirement in the protocol was particularly vague to institutions**

The required level of concretisation of the plans and especially the budgets was insufficiently clear to many institutions. For example, some institutions were taken aback by the fact that the – decentralised-level – budget needed to cover multiple years. Several had only elaborated their budgets at the centralised level or in insufficiently concrete terms, according to the panels. Several

institutions indicated that both multi-year and concrete budgeting at the decentralised level was impossible. However, only very few institutions availed themselves of the opportunity to contact NVAO via email to ask questions regarding the contents of the protocol.

#### *Some panel members also deemed the protocol insufficiently clear*

Despite their training, the protocol left room for differences in interpretation among the panel members. The issue of multi-year coverage and concretisation was discussed in calibration sessions between the panel chairs. By that time, the assessments were already in full swing. Consequently, according to many institutions, panels tended to opt for a strict interpretation in the early stages, especially with respect to the third criterion. This only became manifest to the institutions when the first negative reports were presented, and upon receipt of the letter with points for attention that NVAO sent in June. For the majority of the institutions, by that time it was too late to anticipate this or to learn from one another.

#### **Involving decentralised level causes trouble for universities of applied sciences**

Something that stands out in the negative reports is that compared to those of research universities, the plans submitted by universities of applied sciences tend to be rated as unsatisfactory more frequently. One of the explanations that came up during the interviews is that the universities of applied sciences have been particularly ambitious in involving decentralised stakeholders, in some cases, down to the programme level. Beforehand, the parties involved in the professional higher education sector assumed that criterion 2 (stakeholder involvement) could turn out to be a bottleneck. In their own words, their diligent efforts with respect to this criterion have hampered the multi-year elaboration of the plans, as membership of the decentralised participation councils changed annually, and the councils needed to consent to the plans. In view of the previous central message of “leeway and trust”, some institutions erroneously assumed that a process proposal or a less concretised multi-year plan would satisfy the requirements. The difference in the outcomes can perhaps be attributed to the fact that research universities have longer experience with participation councils at the faculty level; in the Higher Education and Research Act, the pertinent stipulations for academic higher education are more explicit than those pertaining to professional higher education.

#### **Implementation leaves little room for adjusting course when problems arise**

Initially, NVAO process coordinators refrained from checking the contents of documents submitted, even if these could still be remedied prior to the visit. Furthermore, in many cases they were not involved until after a dossier had been submitted, by which time they (only) contacted the institution regarding practical matters and logistics for the panel visit. In exceptional cases, it would thus be clear, even before the visit, that an institution could not expect a positive report. The agreement was that the institutions could not supply any missing information upon completion of the visit. Several institutions indicated that if they had had such an option, they would have been able to quickly remedy their deficiencies.

## 5.2 Overall conclusion

Based on the above conclusions, it is safe to say that various aspects in the process have collectively played a part in the unexpectedly high number of negative ex-ante assessments: from pressure on the development of the framework and central communication not always properly geared to the reality of the institutions, up to uncertainty regarding the required degree of concretisation and the lack of options to adjust course in the implementation phase.

Concurrently, we would like to nuance the number of negative judgements, as such judgements are not necessarily uncommon in similar procedures. Furthermore, our study has revealed that negative judgements were primarily based on a specific criterion, i.e., the multi-year coverage and concretisation of the plans. Perhaps, they could have been avoided if the aforementioned aspects had not also featured in the process. For that reason, the paragraph below sets out some recommendations for the next phase.

### 5.3 Recommendations for the future

The paragraph below sets out several recommendations. Some are specifically focused on the next phase of the Quality Agreements, whereas others address future similar processes.

#### **A. Allow sufficient time and ensure sufficient coordination in complex and delicate processes**

Pressure of time and political pressure are far from helpful in a delicate and complex process involving many parties. Ensure a careful process that allows sufficient time and scope for the continued coordination of underlying goals with the implementation of the plans. Especially if external factors are impacting the process or its contents, it is essential to prevent differences in interpretation that may arise over time. Minimise noise and maximise the transparency of expectations regarding the process among the decision-level and administrative parties involved. Discuss such expectations regularly and make them explicit. This will also provide a sound basis for collective and consistent communication to the institutions.

#### **B. Coordinate external communication properly with the parties involved**

This process has made the importance of consistent and effective communication abundantly clear. In a situation in which different parties can harbour different expectations of processes, univocal communication is essential. Coordinate with all the relevant parties which narrative will be communicated to the outside world, by whom and when. Check regularly whether everyone is still on the same wavelength. Keep each other sharp and talk to one another if false expectations are expressed.

#### **C. Ensure in good time that the midterm review requirements are clear to all the institutions**

The realisation of the plan is scheduled to be assessed by the autumn of 2022. Ensure that the institutions are aware, in good time, of what is expected of them in terms of accountability, and coordinate this with decision-level and administrative parties involved. This can prevent institutions from going overboard in excessive justification, with the memory of negative plan assessments still at the back of their minds. Use examples to this end. Furthermore, it may be helpful to provide the institutions with room for a qualitative explanation regarding the progress of their own integral quality agenda, rather than providing a purely technical justification.

#### **D. Avoid differences in interpretation by incorporating various checks**

Although a more specific wording in the protocol of the exact requirements may be difficult (considering that this will limit the institutions' scope for substantiation), there are methods to reduce uncertainty regarding the protocol:

- Supplement the protocol with examples that clarify the level of detail to be met by a plan;
- Test a protocol beforehand among those who are to use it in actual practice, such as the Quality Agreements project leaders of the universities and the (future) panel members.

Check whether they observe any uncertainties in the protocol and whether the protocol leaves room for differences in interpretation;

- Evaluate immediately upon receipt of the first documents whether they feature differences in interpretation. Communicate this issue thoroughly to other institutions that are still in the preparatory stages of plans or justifications;
- Do not sit and wait for institutions to come up with questions, but pro-actively contact them to check how the generation of plans or the accountability process is proceeding. On the NVAO side, for example, process coordinators could take this on. Ensure that each of them has the same perception of what is expected of the assessment.

#### **E. Enhance knowledge sharing and start calibrating between panel members at an early stage**

Invest more in the training and especially in the timely calibration of panels. Start well before the assessments commence, in order to identify potentially “complicated situations”. Discussing this with all the panel members will also prevent (any semblance of) differences in treatment and assessment of institutions. In addition, have panel members assessing a particular type of institution participate in the assessment of several other institutions. Have panel compositions consistently overlap, with core compositions for certain groups of institutions such as those providing fine and performing arts programmes. Make the most of the advantages of the two approaches: a standard panel for certain institutions, such as the teacher training colleges, enhances the panel’s expertise in a certain field, whilst overlapping compositions foster knowledge sharing and calibration.

#### **F. Build in a check for completeness, prior to the panel visits**

Integrate a check for completeness of documents into the process, during both the ex-ante assessment and with respect to the justification. Subsequently, offer the institutions the opportunity to forward documents prior to or up to, e.g., two weeks after the panel visit. Thus, institutions will not automatically end up in a one-year improvement procedure on account of a minor deficiency. Furthermore, postpone the panel visit if it is certain up front that a plan does not meet the requirements.

#### **G. Evaluate the division of tasks between NVAO and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and set down clear working arrangements**

NVAO normally holds an autonomous assessment position. With respect to the QA, however, NVAO plays an advisory role; the Minister of Education, Culture and Science may depart from the advice provided. For the position of NVAO as an independent and autonomous assessor of educational quality, optimum transparency in the grounds for deviation by the Ministry is essential. Furthermore, it is important for such grounds to be invoked as little as possible, and to prevent institutions from counting on their ability to convince the Ministry that a quality plan rated as unsatisfactory by NVAO actually meets the requirements. Evaluate the division of tasks between NVAO and the Ministry in the ex-ante assessment jointly and set down working arrangements for the next phase.

## 6 Postface: the yield of the Quality Agreements

In view of the main question of this evaluation, we have not really delved into the yield of the Quality Agreements in a general sense. Nonetheless, it is good to mention that respondents have extensively commented on this yield. Although this study was not set up for this purpose, we would like to pay some attention to this topic in this postface. Opinions on the set-up of the Quality Agreements differ in the world of higher education. The paragraphs below identify three issues that did feature wide consensus.

### **The Quality Agreements enhanced the community spirit within the institutions**

In a more general sense, many respondents have commented that the Quality Agreements have given impetus to the community spirit within institutions. Normally, higher education institutions tend to be – to quote interviewees – fairly loose collections of relatively autonomous programmes and faculties/academies. Many institutions collected input for the quality plan at the decentralised level – among students and staff – which gave rise to a positive atmosphere of creatively contributing ideas and innovation. In this respect, many respondents stated that this not only boosted the community spirit, but also resulted in concrete, useful input for the quality plans.

### **The Quality Agreements gave impetus to the participation councils**

The Quality Agreements have expanded the authority of the participation councils: they needed to approve the final plan. This evaluation has shown that the participation councils had a strong say in the development of the plans. They contributed ideas from the start and helped to substantiate the plan. The participation councils perceived this new task as informative; it has enhanced the position of the participation councils within the institutions.

### **The role of the Supervisory Boards has also been expanded**

The Quality Agreements have also given impetus to the role of the Supervisory Board, as they did with the participation councils. The Supervisory Boards were already involved in an earlier stage of the plan development process and conducted pertinent substantive discussions with the university authorities. They regarded this as a major step forward vis-à-vis the launch of the Performance Agreements in 2012.